

Book Review | *The Many Faces of Beauty*

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Published online: 31 January 2014

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***The Many Faces of Beauty*; Vittorio Hösle (ed.), Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, 512 pp. + bibliographical references and index, black and white and color illustrations, \$65.00 pbk., ISBN 978-0-268-01119-2**

Vittorio Hösle has assembled an ambitious collection on the topic of beauty. With sixteen essays in a volume of 500 pages, he has allowed each author an average of thirty pages per contribution. In all but name, this book falls into the category of a conference proceedings, arising as it does from a 2010 conference sponsored by The Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study. Hösle holds dual appointments at Notre Dame in Philosophy and in German and Russian Languages and Literature, and the selection of conference speakers and thus essayists reflects his interdisciplinary orientation. The non-philosophers outnumber the philosophers three to one. Consequently, anyone approaching this volume as a contribution to philosophical aesthetics will be disappointed. Philosophy is present, but it is not the book's *raison d'être*. Accepting it on its own terms, then, as an interdisciplinary dialogue, how does it fair? It is hard to imagine who will want to read more than a few chapters among the sixteen. Therefore I provide a very brief summary of every chapter, for that is, in the end, the primary way that this review can assist a prospective reader.

The papers are arranged in five groups. There are four papers on beauty in mathematics and nature, four that examine beauty from various perspectives in the social sciences, three forming the grab-bag of "Historicity, Interculturality, and the Ugly as Challenges of Aesthetics," four that concentrate on particular art forms (painting, music, literature, and film), and one on beauty and theology. Hösle's lengthy introduction provides an accurate summary of each essay, with each summary occupying approximately a full page. The book is printed on high quality paper to accommodate the numerous illustrations, a few of which are color. Sadly, there is no list of illustrations, so locating one again by memory requires thumbing through the book. Another unfortunate editorial decision is the failure to impose a

uniform style on the essays. Some essays end with a works cited list, but others employ endnotes only. In the absence of a general bibliography, one must revert to the index to get a unified look at the pattern of scholarly emphasis. However, book titles are not listed as sub-entries under names. If a reader does not already know the titles of Theodor Adorno's principal writings, the index will prompt a hunt over a range of essays.

Part One, "Beauty in Mathematics and Nature," opens with the book's longest essay, a staggering fifty-five pages from Robert P. Langlands on beauty and mathematical theories, during which there is almost no mention of beauty. When Langlands becomes explicit about it (24-25), he appears to describe the sublime in mathematics rather than the beautiful. This equivocation characterizes many of the volume's essays, with authors proceeding as if every discussion of aesthetic properties is a discussion of beauty. This problem reoccurs in the second essay, Mario Livio's "Symmetry: From Perception to the Laws of Nature," which is only tangentially about beauty. Our multiple sensitivities to perceptual symmetry are treated as self-evidently linked to beauty. However, the "reflection" symmetries of J.S. Bach's Musical Offering are not obviously *beautiful* (94-95). Yet Livio proceeds as if possession of aesthetic merit equates with beauty. Livio then offers a very brief discussion of the evolutionary advantages conferred by our perception of beauty (i.e., symmetry). Symmetry is discussed again in the next chapter, Dieter Wandschneider's "Beauty in Nature Both in Its Laws and Its Entities," a Hegelian interpretation of beauty as a manifestation of spirit and the divine. Granted, Hegel was Adorno's primary historical source, but I venture that a number of philosophically informed readers will question Wandschneider's reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in which a passing reference to "the heavens" is read as Adorno's endorsement of a Hegelian "beauty of art [in] the self-conscious spirit" (129).

The highlight of Part One is Christain Illies's "The Evolution of Autonomous Beauty: Sexual Selection versus Natural Selection." Illies, a philosopher of biology, addresses the conceptual muddiness of the earlier essays. We must not assume that finding something pleasurable or attractive is the same as registering its beauty. How, then, do they differ, and how does an evolutionary account of human development explain our sensitivity to the difference? How does a sense of beauty arise through biological evolution? (The mere presence of something does not explain our sensitivity to it; our species is perceptually unaware of most wavelengths of light.) The contrast between Illies and Wandschneider is noteworthy, for Wandschneider's appeal to the divine requires him to suppose that a biological account cannot fully explain our awareness of beauty. Illies likewise recognizes and seeks to explain the relative autonomy of some beauty, but without recourse to a Hegelian unfolding of increasing consciousness of spirit. For Illies, the key assumption is that "all aesthetic phenomena in nature guide actions" (160). There is a survival value in our having developed an unconscious, pleasurable response to various structures and patterns,

and these responses “are still alive in us” (158). Unlike other animals, humans have become conscious of these unconscious triggers, and consciously manipulate them, at times autonomously, for their own sake, in art. For anyone seeking a clear and straightforward introduction to the topic of beauty and evolution, Illies’s essay is highly recommended. From this high point, the book descends into Part Two, which, I fear, will be of limited interest to philosophers. Francesco Pellizzi, a specialist in archaeology and ethnology, offers an extended meditation on differences between traditional art and Modernist art. I defer to Hösle’s judgment that it has something to say, yet I note that his lengthy summary in the Introduction (7-8) makes no attempt to extract a thesis from Pellizzi’s essay. Bjaren Sode Funch, a psychologist, offers a summary of his previously published theory of stages of psychological development as they relate to five types of art appreciation. As the only psychologist selected for the volume, Funch’s existentialist leanings make his theory an idiosyncratic choice. Anyone looking for an introduction to what contemporary psychology reveals about our sense of beauty must look elsewhere. Next is Peter Landau’s “The Law as Expressed in Art.” It is an essay in art history. Unless I have overlooked something, it says nothing about beauty. On those grounds, I think it ought not to have been included. The same might be said of Holger Bonus’s “The Function of Art in The Economy of Cultures,” which is about the expressive power of visual and literary narrative.

Part Three is the book’s primary concentration of philosophy. It opens with Hösle’s own paper, “The Historical Evolution of Aesthetic Theories.” The core of the essay is a ten-page history of philosophical aesthetics, from ancient Greece to Adorno. (Apart from the work of Nelson Goodman, it appears that aesthetics is not pursued in English.) Hösle then extracts a lesson from this history, which appears to be none other than the principle that guided his editorial stance: “the aesthetics of German Idealism retains its classic position [because] it combines a thorough interest in the concrete arts and their history with a metaphysics of beauty and a recognition of a normative dimension of art, which is connected in a complex way with human autonomy” (297). This essay might have been more useful as Chapter 1, as the book’s true Introduction. However, it does contrast nicely with the next piece, Pradeep A. Dhillon’s “A Kantian Approach to Writing a Global Art History.” Without mentioning Hösle, Dhillon challenges his Eurocentricism and his Hegelianism.

Subtitled “The Case from Indian Modern Art,” Dhillon’s essay identifies and challenges a host of “dualistic presuppositions” (315) that have encouraged historians, particularly art historians, to dismiss non-Western modern art as derivative and inauthentic. Dhillon examines art in India in order to show that non-Western culture is more complex than it is generally understood to be, as is the legacy of colonialism. In short, she argues that modernism should be understood from a Kantian rather than a Hegelian perspective, and that modernism is a genuinely global phenomenon (rather than, say, a Western import or

hegemonic imposition). As a piece of original philosophizing, Dhillon's contribution is the most impressive in the book.

The next essay, by Mark W. Roche, dovetails with Dhillon's in its concentration on "the ascendancy of the ugly" in the aesthetics of modernism (339). Focusing on visual art, we return to Hegel and Adorno as the culmination of aesthetic theory (350-351). Given that focus, there is no reason why the essay is grouped with Höle and Dhillon, for it has considerable affinity with the papers in Part Four, on beauty in the various arts. All the more so, given that the lead paper in Part Four, by visual artist Maxim Kantor, is largely concerned with the possibility of genuinely tragic art in post-Christian Western society, in which the avant-garde is "nothing more than paganism's revenge upon Christianity" (383). Nonetheless, Kantor's sweeping, reactionary argument is located in Part Four so that it can be grouped with papers on music, poetry, and film. Mary Kinzie's reflections on poetry are textually sensitive, but to what end? She interprets several poems and one passage of prose and then leaps to the conclusion that "some works of art take time to acquire their beauty" (412). Is Kinzie seriously advocating the position that poems acquire beauty subsequent to their composition? Rereading the argument to that point, she appears only to mean that certain degree of ugliness and sublimity may obscure beauty that is only apparent upon close reading. Yet her actual interpretations of the literary examples say little about the aesthetic dimensions of the examples, so her analysis offers sketchy support for her thesis. Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf's "Beauty in Music" goes to the other extreme: examples are mentioned, but solely as a litany of names and work titles. Mahnkopf's argument is a highly abstract rumination on the history of aesthetics that rests on a very traditional opposition of hedonistic and aesthetic modes of music reception. He argues that there is no beauty in music unless it is approached as fine art (396), for "[t]he beauty of music lies in its philosophical dignity" (398). As in the chapters by Wandschneider and Roche, Adorno is treated as the apogee of Western aesthetics.

Dudley Andrew's essay on film is the highlight of Part Four, in part because the argument takes care to tie the theoretical claims to the details of particular examples. Andrew does not cite philosophers on film, but his basic (undefended) orientation is to adjudicate a debate between two versions of the cinematic transparency thesis. The best films, Andrew contends, strike a balance between the presentation of physical reality and human imagination.

The book closes with Part Five: Beauty and God, but Cyril O'Regan's "Theology, Art, and Beauty" has little to say about God. It is, instead, a discussion whether Christian theology "on its own terms, can positively embrace Joyce or Beckett or appreciate Kandinsky" (461), for these artists represent a "change" in "the meaning of beauty" (460). The change,

however, seems no more than modern art's embrace of the sublime, and there is no clear argument to defend the assertion that recent manifestations of the sublime redefine beauty. There is, furthermore, an undefended assumption that art is at issue when we discuss beauty. Given the book's title, it is odd that the sole essay on theology and beauty devotes precisely one sentence to the beauty of nature (454) in order to focus on products of human activity. It goes almost without saying that a non-Christian perspective would also have been welcome. On balance, *The Many Faces of Beauty* is a well-intentioned but flawed project. Too many of the essayists have surprisingly little to say on the nominal topic, treating a discussion of art as, *ipso facto*, a discussion of beauty. Several others are about the *lack* of beauty in most modern art. In short, essays were invited and then included despite the plain fact that some of them are only weakly related to the organizing topic. If I return to any of these essays again in the future, I predict it will only be to those by Illies, Dhillon, and Andrew.